Chapter 66: Seki-u

STA
!ARE
...IS AWKWARD.
THIS...

THE NEW LADIES-IN-WAITING ARE HERE.
THREE SISTERS, EACH A YEAR APART.

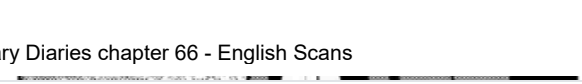
NOM
NOM
NOM
IT'S THE USUAL TIME AND THE USUAL PLACE FOR AFTERNOON REFRESHMENTS...
...BUT NOT THE USUAL COMPANY.
WHAT HASN'T CHANGED, HOWEVER, IS MY INABILITY TO SOCIALIZE.

IN THE SERVICE OF HELPING MEMORIZE THEIR NAMES ...
...THEY WEAR WHITE, BLACK, AND RED RIBBONS IN THEIR HAIR, RESPECTIVELY, MATCHING THEIR NAMES.

...

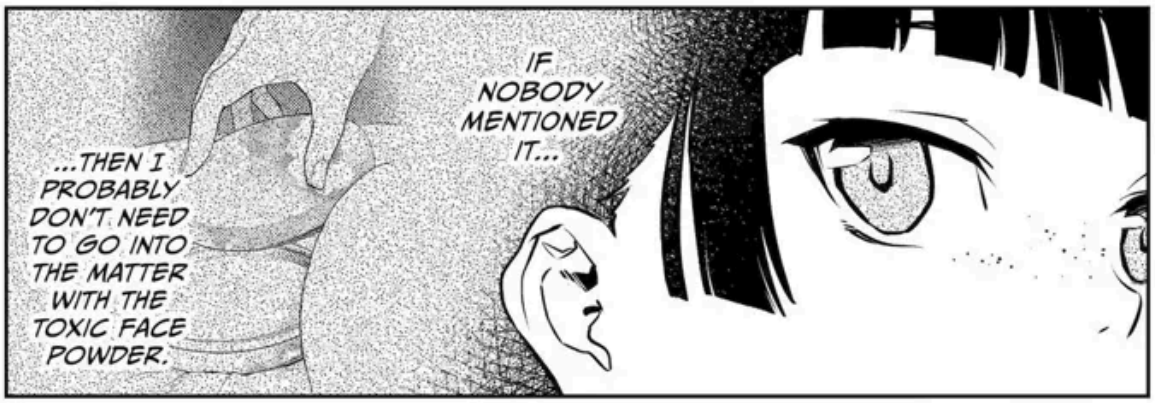
SO...
YOU KNOW, IF YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SHARE ...
...YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO SAY IT OUT LOUD.

IN ORDER FROM OLDEST TO YOUNG-EST:
HAKU-U.
KOKU-U.
AND SEKI-U.

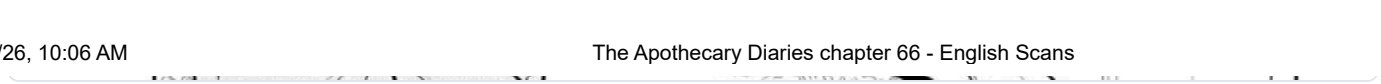


...HOW DID YOU COME TO WORK HERE AT THE JADE PALACE?
HOW? WELL...
I WAS CHOSEN TO WORK AS THE FOOD TESTER BECAUSE THEY WERE UNDER-STAFFED.
AH!
NOT LADY GYOKUYO ...?
GYOKUYO IS NOTHING IF NOT SUSPICIOUS. WHY DOES SHE TRUST YOU?
...BUT I FIND IT HARD TO SWALLOW.
THAT'S WHAT WE WERE TOLD...
OH.
HAKU-U IS THE SAME AGE AS CONSORT GYOKUYO.
PERHAPS... THEY WERE CLOSE AT ONE POINT IN THE PAST.

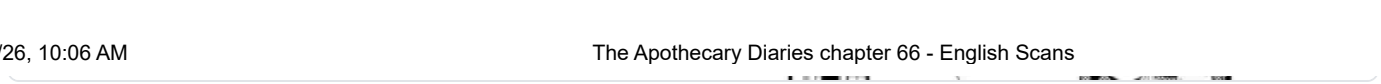
MY JOB IS SIMPLY TO CHECK HER FOOD.
IF THE CONSORT IS EVER SERVED POISON ...
...I AM HERE TO BRING THAT TO LIGHT BY FALLING VICTIM TO IT FIRST.
IT ONLY MAKES SENSE FOR HER TO DOUBT...
...A PERFECT STRANGER APPEARING OUT OF THIN AIR.


IF NOBODY MENTIONED IT...
...THEN I PROBABLY DON'T NEED TO GO INTO THE MATTER WITH THE TOXIC FACE POWDER.

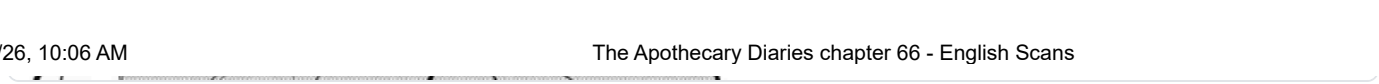
I HAD HEARD AS MUCH, BUT... IT'S AMAZING JUST HOW FRANK YOU REALLY ARE.
THANK YOU.
BOW



WE CAN SEE YOU HAVE A LOT OF FRIENDS OUTSIDE THE JADE PALACE ...
...BUT PLEASE DON'T FORGET ABOUT US.
WE'RE STILL WORKING ON GETTING ACCUSTOMED TO LIFE WITHIN THE INNER COURT.
YOU AND THE OTHER LADIES-IN-WAITING ARE ALL WE HAVE TO RELY ON...
...SO WHAT WILL WE DO IF YOU'RE ALWAYS AWAY?
ESPECIALLY OUR YOUNGEST.
THAT'S TRUE. SEKI-U IS MY AGE, BUT I HAD IGNORED HER...
...IN FAVOR OF SPENDING TIME WITH XIAOLAN AND SHISUI.
FWP
AH. I SEE.



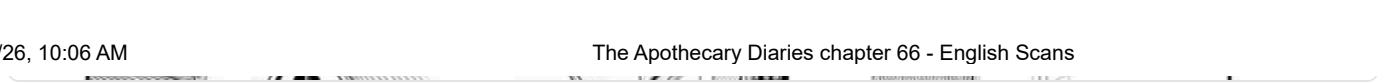
AH
BUT TODAY IS NO DIFFERENT. THEY'RE SURE TO BE WAITING FOR ME AT THE BATHHOUSE.
I DON'T KNOW IF THEY COULD MANAGE HAIR REMOVAL WITHOUT ME...
IF THEY WANT TO KEEP AN EYE ON ME TO SEE IF I'M UP TO ANYTHING...
WHY DON'T YOU JOIN ME IN WORKING IN THE BATHHOUSE? WE CAN START TODAY.
HUH?!
THE BATH-HOUSE?



GRIN
GRIN
YOU SHOULD JOIN HER, SEKI-U.
THE BATH-HOUSE.
NOT THE WORST IDEA I'VE EVER HEARD.
WHAT?! SISTERS ?!

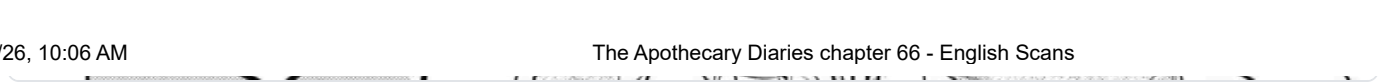
B-BUT!
ONLY BECAUSE SHE WANTS THE LATEST GOSSIP.
SHE'S WORKING IN THE BATHS ON LADY GYOKUYO'S ORDERS, IT'S ALL ABOVE BOARD!
DON'T WORRY SO MUCH.

TAKE CAAARE!



OHHOH
はは
IT'S A PLEASURE TO MEET YOU. I AM SEKI-U.
MY MY!
TWIRL
TWIRL
TWIRL
YOU A FRIEND OF MAOMAO'S?
RIGHT AWAY!
SHOULDN'T WE BE GETTING TO WORK?
PROB-ABLY.
THEY DON'T MEAN ANY HARM.
WHAT IS UP WITH THOSE TWO...?

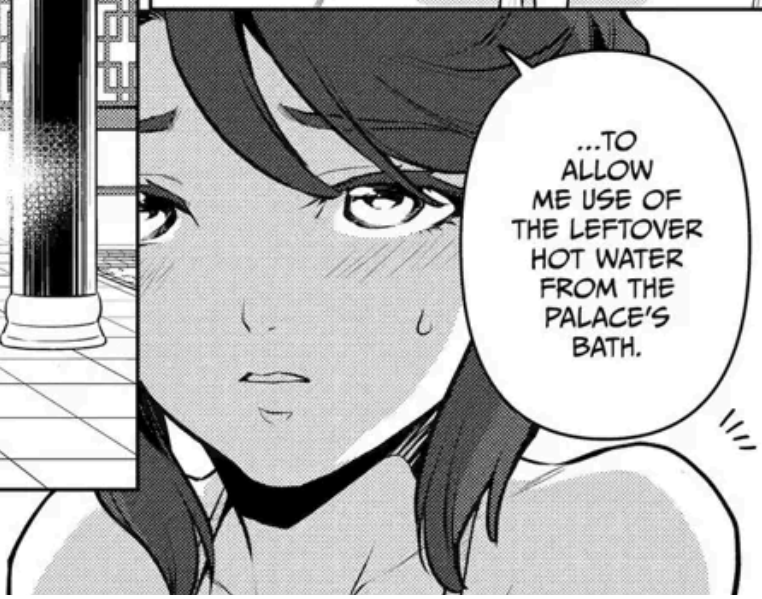
もじ
FIDGET
もじ
FIDGET
THE BATHHOUSE IS TOO HOT TO WEAR MUCH MORE.
YEAH.
...IS THAT... ALL YOU'LL BE WEARING ...?
STRIII
EEK!
IIIIP
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, IMPRESSIVE ?!
OOOH~
WOW, IMPRESSIVE.
OH?

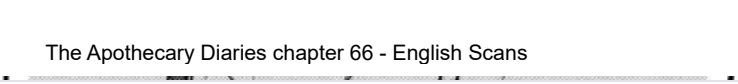


HMPH
I'D MUCH RATHER BE MODESTLY SIZED THAN IMPRESSIVE!
MMPH
HMPH
NOD
NOD
IF IT'S REALLY SO EMBARRASSING ...
...HURRY AND COVER UP SO WE CAN GO IN.
MESSING WITH HER IS EASIER THAN I COULD HAVE EVER IMAGINED.
AAAAGH

HOW HAVE YOU BEEN BATHING UP UNTIL NOW?
MY SISTERS HAVE BEEN COMING HERE TO BATHE...
...BUT I BEGGED LADY GYOKUYO...

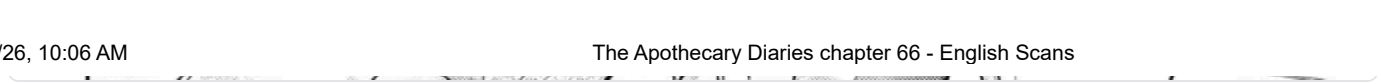
IF SHE'S THIS SHY ABOUT STRIPPING ...
...THEN I WOULD BET SHE MUST BE FROM THE SAME ARID WESTERN LAND CONSORT GYOKUYO IS.
THEY MUST NOT HAVE THE CUSTOM OF REGULAR, COMMUNAL BATHING THERE.


...TO ALLOW ME USE OF THE LEFTOVER HOT WATER FROM THE PALACE'S BATH.



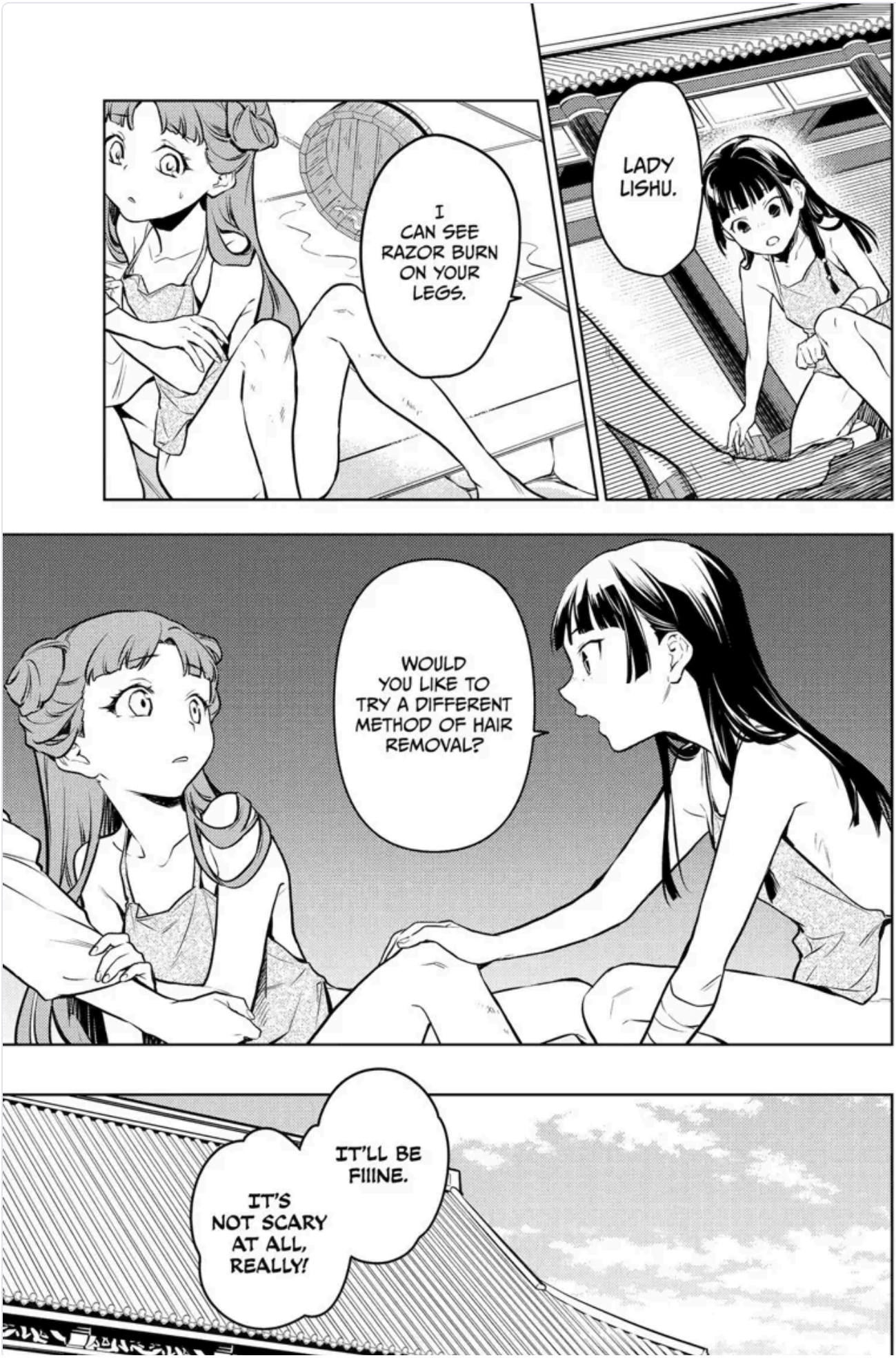
THE PALACE'S BATH IS FOR THE CONSORT'S USE ONLY.
BUT IF CONSORT GYOKUYO HERSELF ALLOWS IT...
...HER LOYAL SISTERS MUST OBLIGE ...
...AND THERE'D BE NOTHING TO STOP HER.
I SEE. THAT'S WHY THEY WERE ACTING THAT WAY ...
...WHEN I INVITED HER TO JOIN ME AT THE BATHS.
WE'RE GOING TO BE GIVING MASSAGES TO BARE-NAKED CONSORTS HERE. BUCK UP.
YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO BE SO SHY.

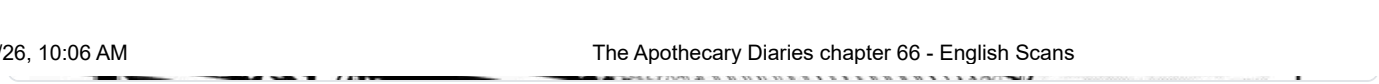
BE SURE TO GET THE OIL ALL OVER THEM.
THAT HELPS THEM UNWIND AND LOOSEN THEIR LIPS.
!
WE'RE WHAT?!
EEEEP
いいっ
あっ
GUH...



PHEW
HAH
あお
あお
WAH
WHAT IS SHE DOING AT THE BATH-HOUSE?
EEEK!
CONSORT LISHU?
OH.
RIGHT, THANK YO—
PLEASE, BE CAREFUL.
IT'S VERY EASY TO SLIP ON THE OIL.
SPLASH

EEEE EEEK ?!
QUIVER
QUIVER
QUIVER
HM. THEY LOOK LIKE THEY'VE SEEN A GHOST.
HM?

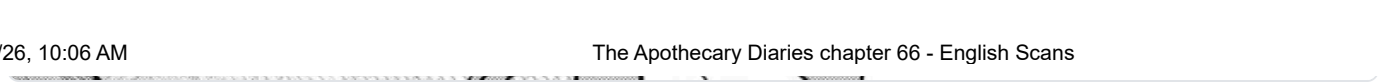

LADY LISHU.
I CAN SEE RAZOR BURN ON YOUR LEGS.
WOULD YOU LIKE TO TRY A DIFFERENT METHOD OF HAIR REMOVAL?
IT'LL BE FIIINE.
IT'S NOT SCARY AT ALL, REALLY!



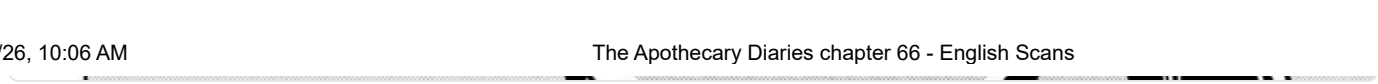
YOU HAVE NO NEED TO WORRY.
I WILL BE VERY GENTLE.
JUST HOOOLD STIIILL, ALL RIGHT?

HMM. I MAY HAVE OVERDONE IT.
DIING
THOSE BACK IN THE PALACE AREN'T QUITE SO METIC-ULOUS...
...AND SHE SPENT SOME TIME UNDER MONASTIC VOWS BEFORE TAKING HER PLACE HERE.
I SEE.
SHE'S NOT.
SHE DOESN'T SEEM ACCUSTOMED TO THIS SORT OF THING.

AT ONLY ABOUT FIFTEEN YEARS OLD, CONSORT LISHU IS NOT TO THE EMPEROR'S TASTE AT ALL.
AT AN EVEN YOUNGER AGE, HOWEVER, SHE MOST CERTAINLY WAS TO THE PREVIOUS EMPEROR'S TASTE.
SHE WAS SENT TO BE HIS CONSORT, AND NOW RETURNS TO BE THE CURRENT EMPEROR'S, ALL FOR HER FAMILY'S POLITICAL DEALINGS.
SHE LEFT HER HOME AT SUCH A YOUNG AGE...
...AND IS SURROUNDED ON ALL SIDES BY INCOMPETENT LADIES-IN-WAITING.
ARE YOU FEELING ALL RIGHT?
EVEN HER HEAD LADY-IN-WAITING, WITH HER CURRENT DEVOTION ...
...TORMENTED HER IN THE PAST.
CONSIDERING ALL OF THAT...
...I CAN'T HELP BUT FEEL SORRY FOR HER.

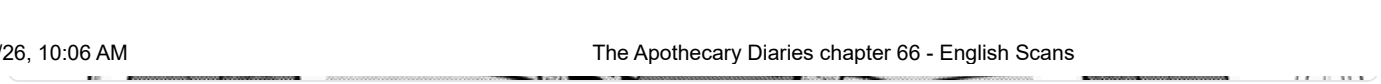


SHUDDER...
WHAT IS IT?
BUT WHY ARE YOU HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE?
IS THERE SOME REASON YOU CAN'T BATHE IN THE DIAMOND PALACE?
THAT BATH...
...NOW BELONGS TO A GHOST.

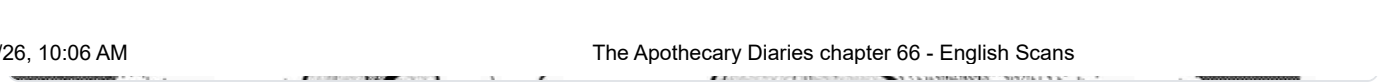


THEY DON'T LOOK LIKE THEY'RE JOKING. THEY REALLY DID SEE A GHOST?
ブル SHIVER
ブル SHIVER
...PERHAPS YOU SHOULD TAKE THE MATTER TO SIR JINSHI?
IN THAT CASE...
...IF THEY SPEAK TO JINSHI...
...THEN HE'LL BE SURE TO SUMMON ME SOON ENOUGH.
HONESTLY, THOUGH!
WHAT ARE YOU DOING SERVING ANOTHER PRINCIPAL CONSORT ?!
IF YOU CAN CALL IT THAT.
ぷり PUFF
ぷり HUFF

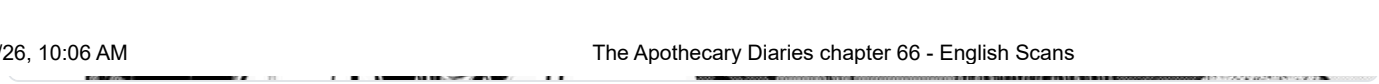
AND SOON ENOUGH ...
HE SUMMONED ME.
...THAT SMILE DOESN'T REACH HIS EYES.
I WAS MADE AWARE OF A TERRIBLE, EARTH-SHAKING SECRET ON THAT HUNTING TRIP.
I'D LET THE BEZOAR DISTRACT ME FROM THAT KNOWLEDGE.
ALL MEN IN THE INNER COURT ARE TO BE EUNUCHS, SAVE THE EMPER-OR.
BUT HERE'S JINSHI, WHO IS NEITHER A EUNUCH NOR THE EMPEROR.
AS MUCH AS I DON'T WANT TO REMEMBER ...
...I CAN CLEARLY RECALL HIS MAGNIFICENT, MODERATE FROG.



NOW THEN.
WHAT DO YOU HAVE FOR US TODAY?
A GHOST HAS MADE A HOME IN ONE OF THE CONSORT'S ROOMS.
OH, NO!
THAT'S AWFUL.
WHICH CONSORT, THOUGH?
I SIMPLY MUST GO AND GIVE HER MY WELL-WISHES.
LADY GYOKUYO, PLEASE. YOU'RE IN NO STATE TO BE GOING ANYWHERE.
WITH HOW CURIOUS THIS CONSORT IS, SHE'LL WANT TO KNOW EXACTLY WHAT'S GOING ON.
THEN WE CAN SEND A MESSENGER.
AH, I KNOW.



WOULD YOU HAPPEN TO BE AVAILABLE, MAOMAO?
THIS AGAIN.
OH HO HO
I'D BE WILLING TO LEND HER TO YOU.
THEN YOU'D BE WILLING TO RETURN HER TO ME?
NO.
SWSH
I'D LIKE YOU TO RETURN HER TO ME.



NO ONE ELSE BUT MAOMAO.
!!

I'M GOING TO MAKE SURE THESE LIPS REMAIN SEALED.
STROKE...
AND ONCE SHE COMES BACK...
SWIP...
...I'M AFRAID SHE WON'T HAVE ANYTHING MORE TO TELL YOU.

NOW, EXCUSE ME.
GRIN
GAWP...
WIPE
WIPE
IF I KNEW I'D BE PAYING BY CARRYING HIS SECRET TO MY VERY GRAVE...
...I WOULD'VE ASKED FOR MORE THAN THE BEZOAR.
...A BLASTED FROG.
WHAT WAS THAT?